

SEASONS AND SIGNS

A brief history of the liturgical calendar
and designs for a cycle of banners for the
liturgical seasons.

by

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ABSTRACT

This is a dissertation discussion of the use of the liturgical calendar as a tool for worship renewal in the contemporary church. It includes a history of the development and significance of the liturgical calendar written for use by lay people and designs for a cycle of banners for the liturgical seasons and the sacraments and ceremonies celebrated in the life of a local congregation.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the past few years there has been an increasing sense that worship in United Methodism has often become a lifeless, mechanical exercise, where pastor and people come together for an hour once a week and leave without any sense that something significant has occurred. If any question the presence of this dissatisfaction, one only has to look at the proliferation of "contemporary" or "folk" services, the "house churches", and the "alternative rituals" to recognize the needs which they attempt to meet. Clearly, congregations and clergy alike are looking for ways to make worship a vital, significant factor in congregational life.

The United Methodist Church grows out of a historical setting which was suspicious of Catholicism and high church Anglicanism and consequently rejected much of traditional liturgical practice which characterized their worship. The development of the church in contemporary America has seen a movement away from the resulting free-worship tradition as church membership became more sophisticated and less comfortable with sometimes openly emotional worship experiences. The result is a church without much sense of liturgical tradition, rejecting the patterns which replaced traditional liturgical worship, and left not quite sure where to go.

To further complicate matters, in most United Methodist churches, lay involvement in worship is minimal except as spectators. Few churches involve laypersons in anything beyond reading a few responses, singing some hymns, or singing in the choir. Occasionally laypeople assist as worship leaders, but rarely do they have any part in developing or planning the services. There is little sense of involvement or ownership of the worship, and it is often perceived as a performance planned, directed and staged by the clergy, with the congrega-

tion as audience.

It is my belief that the road to revitalizing worship in today's church lies not through more guitars, more slide shows, more dialogue sermons, and more balloons - although these may play a part - but through a reclaiming of our history, and a reshaping of what is valuable within it to speak to our lives today. This is a task which belongs not just to the clergy, but to the whole church. I propose that a re-examination of the liturgical calendar could provide a structure for a better understanding of worship that would enable laypersons and clergy to join in developing meaningful worship experiences.

The liturgical calendar and its symbolism provide a basis for a program of worship renewal in a local church which I believe can result in greater participation by a better-informed laity and a solid, well-balanced sequence of worship experiences for the congregation. There are many directions in which this renewal program could be developed: study groups, lay worship development groups, church school curricula, worship and the arts groups - the possibilities are myriad.

This project is intended to develop two resource for the use of local congregations who are seeking to utilize the liturgical calendar as a part of worship renewal. The first is a history of the development of the church year and an explanation of the significance of the seasons and holidays, written to be used as a resource by laypeople. It could be used as a study resource for a class, as a reference for teachers, or as background material for worship task groups.

The second section will be a cycle of banners appropriate for use in worship during the various seasons of the church year. Obviously, teaching people about the history of the liturgical calendar and having

groups make and use banners will not by themselves revitalize worship. However, they suggest two possibilities among many that a congregation seeking that revitalization might explore.

Chapter 2

SEASONS

A guide to understanding the church year.

For everything there is a season, and a
time for every matter under heaven.

Ecclesiastes 3:1

The first Christians were Jews who saw themselves as Jews who had met the Messiah. Their worship celebrated the new dimension to their lives, but it was firmly grounded in their Jewish heritage. In many situations they continued to celebrate Jewish religious festivals and to observe the Jewish Sabbath along with their celebration of their Christian faith. Gradually, however, Christianity's distinctiveness from Judaism came to be emphasized and a uniquely Christian cycle of festivals and seasons developed.

The source of the Christian year was the celebration of the resurrection. Each week, the early church commemorated the risen Christ in a "little Easter." This weekly cycle culminated in the Pascha, the annual celebration of both the Passion and resurrection.¹

Pentecost, celebrated seven weeks after Easter, was second only to Easter to the early church both in its date of origin and its importance.² The period of time between these two festivals (sometimes called Quinquagesima or the Great Fifty Days) was the only season known to Christians in the first-century church.³ It was a time focused on the resurrection, when joyful celebration was the rule, and kneeling and fasting were forbidden.⁴ It was probably influenced by Jewish Omer Days, which were observed during the seven weeks between Passover and Pentecost.⁵

The third great festival to develop in the church, perhaps as early as the end of the first century, was Epiphany.⁶

1 Edward T. Horn, *The Christian Year* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press 1957), p. 16

2 Horn, p. 17

3 Horn, p. 17

4 Horn, p. 132

5 Horn, p. 132

6 Horn, p. 17

Epiphany, celebrated on January 6, was originally a festival commemorating the Incarnation -- the birth and the baptism of Jesus. The time for celebration was probably affected by two pagan festivals. The celebration of the birth of Aeon from Kore, the Virgin, was a winter solstice festival which was replaced for Christians by Epiphany celebrations. The association of the commemoration of the miracle at the marriage at Cana with the Epiphany celebration is due partly to Jesus' manifestation of himself there, but is also undoubtedly linked to the pagan festival of the wine god Dionysius which was celebrated on January 5 and 6.⁷

Local communities also celebrated anniversaries of martyrs from within their congregation. Since their death was seen as the day of entrance into life eternal, the dates of their death, rather than their birth, were celebrated.⁸

The influence of the first Christians' Jewish background is apparent at several points. The date for Easter (or the Pascha) was determined by the date of the Jewish Passover, since the Passion Narratives made clear that Jesus was in Jerusalem during Holy Week to celebrate the Passover.⁹ The Jewish Feast of the Weeks, celebrated during Jesus' day as a spring harvest festival, became the Christian Pentecost.¹⁰ The influence of the Jewish method of calculating days from sundown to sundown is seen in descriptions such as that found in Acts 20:7-12 where the first or Lord's Day begins at sundown and Paul preaches until midnight, followed by breaking of bread and the end of the service at dawn.

7 Horn, p. 83

8 Horn, p. 17

9 Matthew 26:2, Mark 14:1, Luke 22:1, John 13:1

10 Horn, p. 18

This tradition persists in contemporary life in the vigils preceding major festivals, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition, and in widespread observance of Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve, Hallowe'en (All Hallows or Saints Eve), etc. The very length of the week at seven days is a contribution of our Jewish heritage. It was not a universal pattern at the time of Jesus. The Greeks divided thirty-day months into ten-day sections, and the Romans utilized an eight-day week.¹¹

Throughout their history, Jews observed the Sabbath as a holy day, and pious Jews in Jesus' day also kept Tuesday and Thursday as fast days. Christians kept the same pattern of a weekly holy day and fast days, but observed their holy day on Sunday, and fasted on Wednesday and Friday to emphasize to Jewish converts that to become Christian meant a complete change in their lives.¹²

The church of the fourth century had then a church calendar which looked like this:

- a seven day week with days beginning at sundown
- weekly celebrations of the resurrection on
Sunday (also called the Lord's Day)
- fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays
- annual celebrations of:

Pascha - commemorating both the passion and the resurrection

Pentecost - commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit

Epiphany - commemorating the manifestation of the Christ in his birth and baptism.

11 Horn, p. 19

12 Horn, p. 19

Then in 313 A.D., the Edict of Toleration was issued by Emperor Constantine, and suddenly the church found itself in an entirely new circumstance. No longer was it an underground movement, persecuted and fearful, cautious about those who sought to join. Now worship could be public, church buildings could be built, and places linked with historic events in Christian history could be sought and revered. This interest in recovery of Christianity's historic places was very prominent during the fourth century and led to further development of the church calendar. Sites associated with events in the life of Jesus were located, frequently basilicas were built, and special services and processions were developed to commemorate the events which had occurred there. Pilgrims journeyed to these places, participated in the observances, and returned to their homes encouraging use of adaptations of these services in their local communities. This was particularly true in Rome, and since Rome became predominant in the Western part of Christendom, the practices of the church in Rome gradually became accepted as the practice of the Western Church.¹³

During the fourth century each of the three great ancient festivals of the church underwent a division. The Pascha became separated into Easter and Good Friday, Epiphany was distinguished from Christmas, and Pentecost was separated from Ascension. The development of Good Friday took place initially in Jerusalem and was a result of development of Holy Week ceremonies repeating the events of the Passion. The Eastern Church always considered Epiphany important, and it was observed in Gaul and in Spain in the fourth century; but apparently it was not ever a festival in Rome as a commemoration of the birth and baptism of Jesus.

¹³ Horn, p. 21

December 25 was accepted as the birthdate instead, probably to replace the pagan Roman Festival of the Unconquered Sun (Natalis solis invicti) occurring at the winter solstice.¹⁴ Since Emperor Constantine came from the religious cult celebrating this festival, it is not surprising that he saw the analogy between the "Unconquered Sun" and Jesus as the "Sun of Righteousness."¹⁵

The building of a basilica at the supposed site of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives probably instigated the celebration of Ascension Day as a separate observance from Pentecost.¹⁶

As these festivals entered the tradition, liturgical seasons also developed. Prior to the fourth century the only season celebrated by the church was the Easter season of the seven weeks between Easter and Pentecost. Lent was the next to develop. Fasting prior to Pascha was common in the ancient church. The time the fast was observed originally was from Friday evening until Sunday morning, and it was gradually extended to forty hours (the traditional length of time Jesus was in the tomb) and then by the early third century to six days. This fast was seen as a preparation for Easter.¹⁷ During the period prior to the fourth century candidates for baptism, called catechumens, were instructed and examined for the forty days preceding their baptism on Easter. They fasted during this forty-day period.^{18.}

¹⁴ Horn, p. 22

¹⁵ Horn, p. 67

¹⁶ Theodore Kleinmans, The Year of the Lord (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), p. 84

¹⁷ A Allen McArthur. The Evolution of the Christian Year (London: SCM Press, 1953), pp. 114-116.

¹⁸ McArthur, p. 123

Penitents, under the discipline of the church, also fasted during this time in preparation for their public reconciliation at Easter.¹⁹ All of these traditions began to be drawn together after the Edict of Toleration in 313 resulted in a relaxation of the strictness of these observances, and eventually the period of fasting was understood to apply to all the faithful. The length of Lent varied, originally being most frequently thirty-six days, or a tithe of the year, then in the late seventh or early eighth century the four days from Ash Wednesday to the first Sunday in Lent were added, and Lent was observed for the forty days, excepting Sundays, preceding Easter.²⁰ This was undoubtedly influenced by the forty days spent fasting in the wilderness by Jesus before the start of his public ministry,²¹ and is also reminiscent of the forty days spent by Moses on Sinai²² and the forty days spent by Elijah on his journey to Horeb, the Mount of God.²³

Advent emerged as preparation for Christmas as Lent was a preparation for Easter. In Spain, where Epiphany was celebrated, there was a period of fasting and daily church attendance beginning December 17 and lasting for three weeks. When this custom was adopted by the churches in Italy and Gaul, it was transferred to preparation for Christmas. The length varied from a six-weeks-long observance in Gaul to five weeks in Italy and Spain and the four weeks at Rome which became normative.²⁴

19 Horn, p. 23

20 Horn, p. 102

21 Matthew 4:2, Luke 4:2

22 Exodus 24:18, Deuteronomy 9:9

23 I Kings 19:8

24 Horn, p. 24

With this development of the seasons the church had a liturgical calendar which for one half of the calendar year celebrated a cycle of festivals marking the life of Christ. The second half of the year emphasized the life and teachings of Jesus and their application to the life of the Christian.

Today in United Methodism, the liturgical calendar is much the same as it was in the church of the fourth century. The biggest difference is that there is no celebration of saints' or martyrs' days. The festivals of Ascension and Epiphany, which always fall on weekdays, have tended to be neglected and many lay people are unaware of their very existence. They are however, retained at least in theory in the liturgical calendar of the church.

Advent, consisting of the four Sundays preceding Christmas, begins the church's year. It is a season of anticipation and preparation for the coming of Christ into the world and our lives. Although grey and blue are sometimes used, the traditional liturgical color is purple, symbolizing Christ's royalty and our penitence as we prepare for his coming.

Christmastide begins on Christmas Day and lasts until January 5. It is a celebration of the birth of Jesus. White, which is generally used with events and seasons with strong Christological associations, is the traditional color for the season. It is a time for joyful celebration and reflection on the meaning of the incarnation.

From Epiphany Day, January 6, until Ash Wednesday, we observe the season of Epiphany (sometimes called the season after Epiphany). During this season the church focuses upon the manifestation of God through the signs and teachings of Jesus. It is frequently a time for mission emphases, with the stories of the Magi coming to symbolize the manifesta-

tion of God not only to the Jews, but to all the earth. White is the liturgical color for the first Sunday of Epiphany, because of its associations with Jesus' baptism, and green has been traditionally used for the following Sundays.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, forty days, not counting Sundays, before Easter. It is a period of anticipation like Advent, but focusing upon the events of Passion Week and the Crucifixion. Since Sundays are always reminders of the Resurrection, they are excluded from the more somber penitential mood of the forty-day preparation for Easter. It is a time when confirmation classes frequently are held, echoing the early church's practice of preparing catechumens for baptism at Easter by fasting and study during Lent. Purple, with its connotations of both royalty and penitence, is the liturgical color.

Holy Week, the week preceding Easter, is one of the infrequent times when Protestant churches hold liturgical observances other than on Sundays. Maundy Thursday, commemorating the institution of the Lord's Supper, and Good Friday, marking the Crucifixion, are frequently the occasion for special services in local churches. Although the purple of the Lenten season is still appropriate, some churches may choose to use black for the period from Good Friday until Easter. In some churches the tradition of removing all paraments, hangings and banners and leaving the church bare of ornamentation during this period may be observed.

Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox, and therefore, falls on differing dates each year. It is the beginning of the Eastertide season, which lasts until Pentecost, fifty days later. During this season the church celebrates

the resurrection and the traditional color is white. New members are frequently confirmed during this time.

Pentecost marks the descent of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the Christian Church. It is celebrated on the seventh Sunday after Easter and is followed by the season of Pentecost (sometimes referred to as the "season after Pentecost"). Red, which is associated with the Holy Spirit, is the traditional color for the season. Pentecost is observed until the last Sunday in August.

Kingdomtide is the name used in United Methodism to designate the period from the last Sunday in August until Advent. It is not associated with particular events as the other seasons are, but with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Various shades of green, with their reminders of new life and growth, are the appropriate liturgical colors.

This cycle provides a structure where the first part of each year repeats remembrances of the significant events in God's scheme of redemption: the advent, nativity, manifestation, suffering, crucifixion, resurrection of Jesus, and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the second part of the year is devoted to growth in the Christian life and the lessons to be found in the life and teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. A congregation which is seeking to explore all of the dimensions of the gospel in a balanced and complete way will find that responsible use of this traditional structure will be a valuable assistance in their task.

Chapter 3

SIGNS

Banners to celebrate the seasons of the church year

In the name of God we will set up our
banners.

Psalm 20:5

Banners have been used in Christian worship from the earliest beginnings of the church. They have led processions of the faithful, marked important ceremonies and celebrations, created worship settings, hidden cold stone walls, and provided a bare canvas for the theological and artistic expression of countless believers. Particularly for women, they have been a means of participation in the artistic life of the church.

In the ancient hymn Vexilla Regis, composed in 569, the words proclaim "The royal banners forward go, the cross shines forth in mystic glow"¹ The vexillum was the old Roman cavalry standard and was carried before the troops in a manner which give to the church the custom of banners being carried before religious processions. Later use of textile art as stationary decoration sprang from several sources. The shrouding of images and crosses during Lent emerged during the twelfth century as an act of piety focussing on the suffering of Christ on the cross. Originally, just the Christus Rex, the triumphant Christ in Majesty, was veiled, but eventually the custom included all crosses and images. The drapes were at first simply unbleached linen, but later were frequently elaborately decorated. In the medieval church, there was often a veil used between the chancel and the nave during the period from Ash Wednesday until Easter Eve. This veil was in some cases sheer enough that altar candles could be seen through it and in other cases was as thick as a Persian carpet.²

1 Marian Ireland, Textile Art in the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 68

2 Ireland, pp. 68-69

Sheer practicality was yet another source for use of stationary textile art in churches. Medieval architecture created stone churches which were often cold, damp and drafty. Elaborate tapestries and needlework hangings not only added to the beauty of the sanctuary, they increased the worshippers' comfort as well.

Examples of textile art with religious themes are available from the earliest periods of the church. The styles parallel developments in other forms of artistic expression such as painting, sculpture and architecture. It is interesting to note the differences in the ways these art objects are perceived, however. Great paintings and sculptures are identified as works of art by both contemporaries of the creators and subsequent viewers. The artists who create them are identified and honored. They are also, almost without exception, men. Textile art, even what today is recognized as not only technically perfect, but also artistically beautiful, was perceived at the time of its creation as being somehow in a different and inferior category. Textile art is also almost without exception the creation of women. Names of the artists who designed and created these works of art were usually not identified, remembered, or recorded. Where the artists are identified, it is generally collectively, (e.g. the sisters of St. Anne's Cloister), or in the rare cases where a man was artist (e.g. the Apocalypse Tapestry of Angers, designed by Jean de Buge and woven by Nicholas Battaille). Textile arts have provided an avenue of participation in the artistic life of the church for women to whom other avenues were blocked because of their sex, but the price we have paid for our perception of women as inferior has been a devaluation of the beauty which they have created and a loss of their identity in history.

It is also interesting to note that textile art is the only art form where the creation is often a truly communal effort. In such forms as painting, we have examples like the Flemish schools of painting and the Italian frescoists where a master painter did a design which was then executed by a group of students, but I have been unable to identify any other area where the actual creative process was a collective effort except in textile arts.

Textile arts in the contemporary church reflect the tradition from which they come. Banners are carried in procession and hung on walls, and they are still largely the work of women - often working collectively. Textile arts include much more than banners, of course, and beautiful work is being done with vestments, paraments, and furnishings. However, in this project I have focussed on banners and have created a cycle of banners for use in the local church setting. I have included designs for each of the liturgical seasons, and for the sacraments and ceremonies celebrated in the life of the congregation. The aim has been to keep the designs artistically simple enough to be executed with reasonable ease, and to use symbolism which is drawn from the historical traditions of our faith. I have further attempted to include not only symbols which are generally recognizable and easily interpreted by most Christians, but also to include some symbolism which may need some initial explanation but will hopefully increase the viewer's appreciation of the richness of our heritage of religious symbolism.

PLATES

Plate I**ADVENT**

Jerusalem becomes the symbol for all humanity in this banner of expectation for advent. The pathway leads to a lighted doorway in the city wall - a bright, small spot of light in an otherwise dark, foreboding world. The caption reflects the view of Jesus as ruler, and makes it a banner which could also be used for Palm Sunday.



Plate II**CHRISTMASTIDE**

This banner for Christmastide uses both obvious and more subtle symbolism. The baby in the stylized manger is one of the most familiar symbols of Christmas. The open, outstretched hand is an ancient, but somewhat unfamiliar symbol for the creator God, which in this design with more familiar symbols, is easily interpreted. The star is a familiar Christmas symbol for the birth of Christ and here serves as a reminder of his death as well by its elongation into a cross.

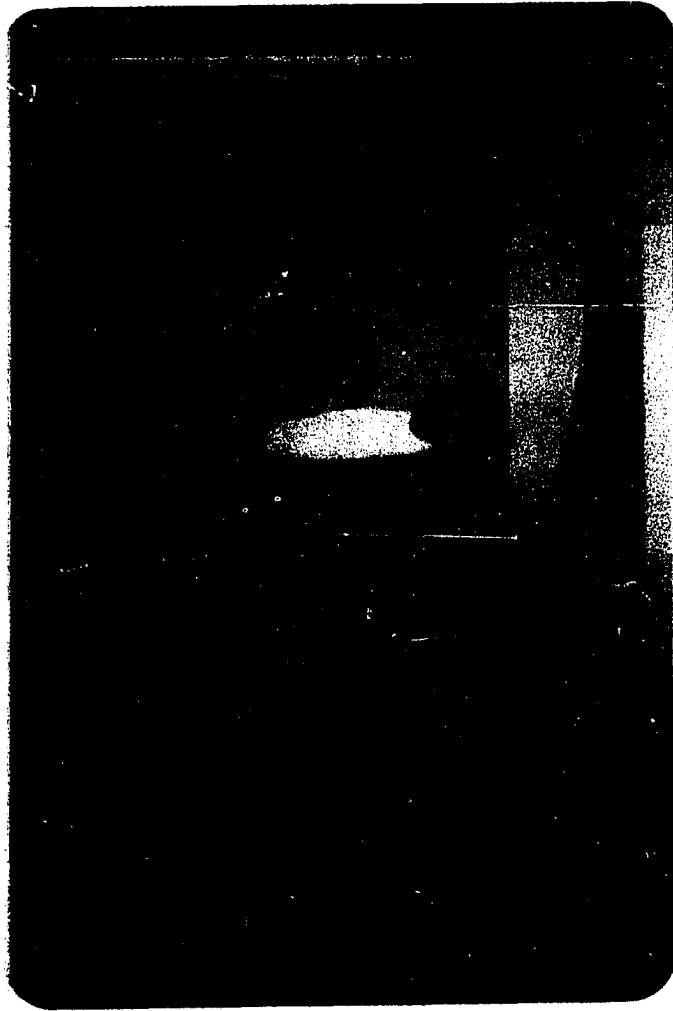


Plate III

EPIPHANY

The tradition that the wise men were from Asia, Africa and India, representing the major parts of the then-known world, is symbolized by the style of headdresses in this banner. The epiphany star again is a reminder of both the birth and death of Jesus, and its four points also represent the gospel writers - the means of spreading the word to the gentiles, which is a major theme for Epiphany season.



Plate IV**LENT - GOOD FRIDAY**

The cross is undoubtedly the oldest of our Christian symbols. The grouping of three serves as a reminder of the scene on Golgotha and the thieves who were crucified with Jesus. The simplicity, almost starkness, of the scene allows the viewer to respond with his/her own meanings.

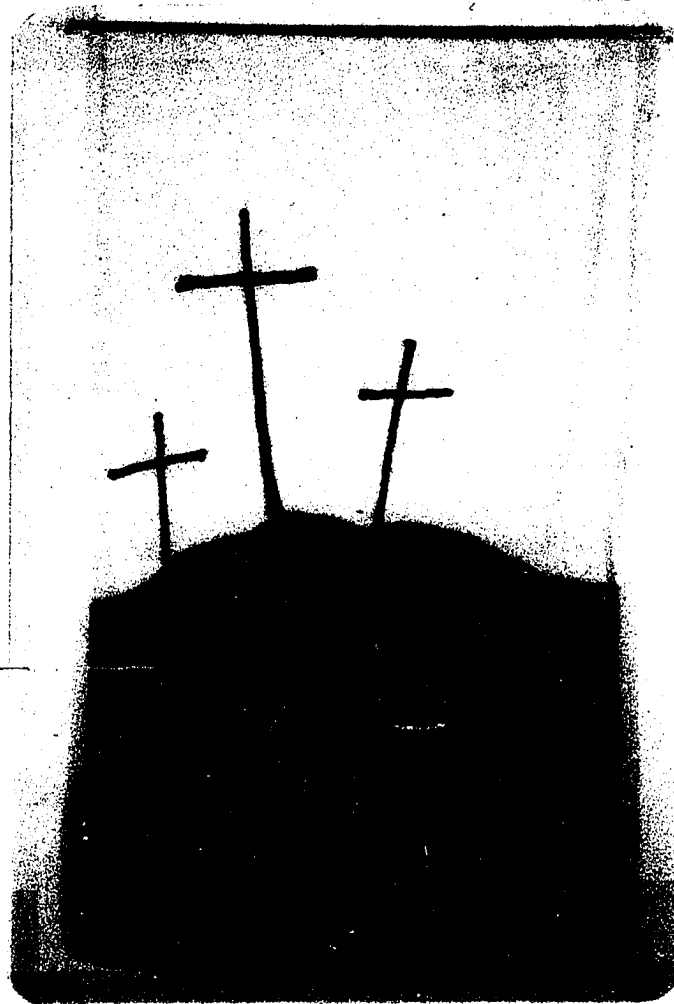


Plate V

PALM SUNDAY

This banner very simply incorporates a crown to symbolize Jesus' royalty and the two most commonly remembered elements of the Palm Sunday story - the palm branches and the word "hosanna!" - to remind the viewer of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.



Plate VI

EASTER

The butterfly's metamorphosis from chrysallis to beautiful flying insect makes a powerful symbol for the resurrection. This is a good example of an ancient symbol which fell into disuse and is now being reclaimed by modern Christians.

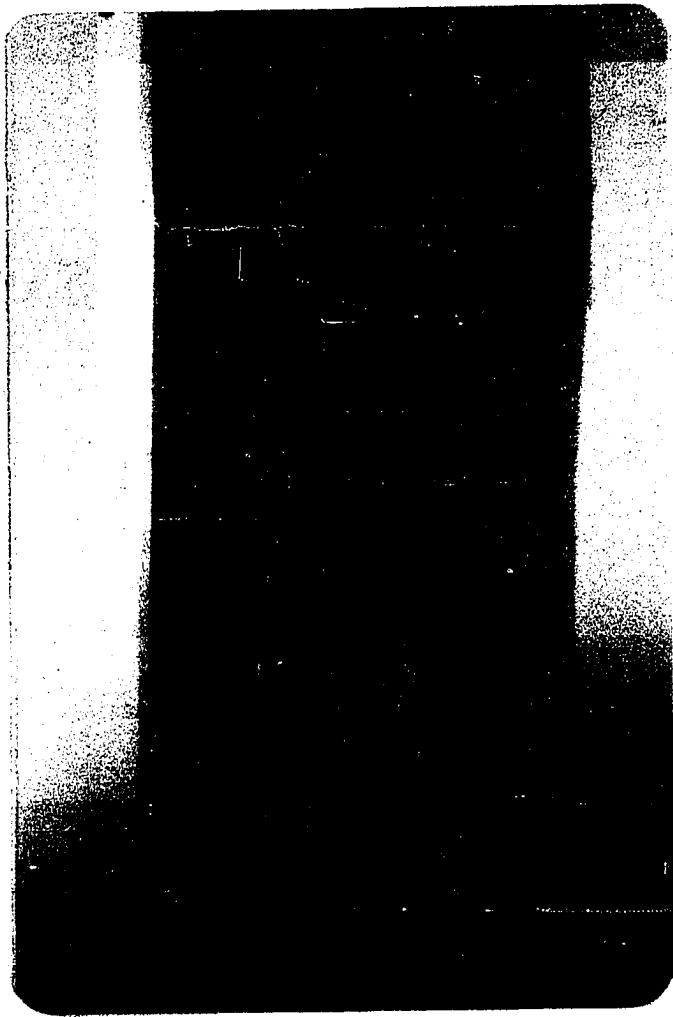


Plate VII

PENTECOST

The use of flames and doves descending to symbolize the coming of the holy spirit is a fairly common symbol in most churches. Closer observation shows that there are seven of the doves, symbolizing the seven gifts of the spirit listed by Paul.



Plate VIII

KINGDOMTIDE

Since the season of Kingdومتide deals with the life and teachings of Jesus and the significance of the Biblical message to the life of the Christian, no one banner can hope to be appropriate for the entire season. Ideally, banners should change each week to reflect the theme for that particular service. This banner is one such possibility.



Plate IX**BAPTISM**

Both the descending dove and water are familiar symbols for baptism. The shepherd's crook with the superimposed cross represents the source of the new Christian's new life.

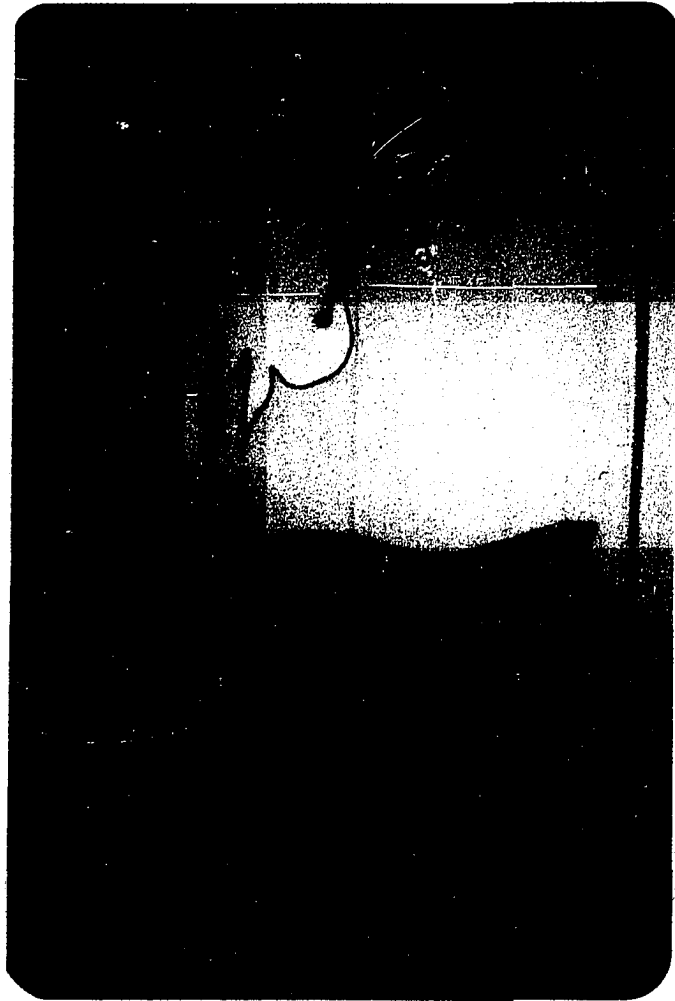


Plate X**CONFIRMATION**

A small green shoot representing new life and growth become symbols for the confirmand. The placement of the plant on the cross symbolizes the hoped-for direction of growth.

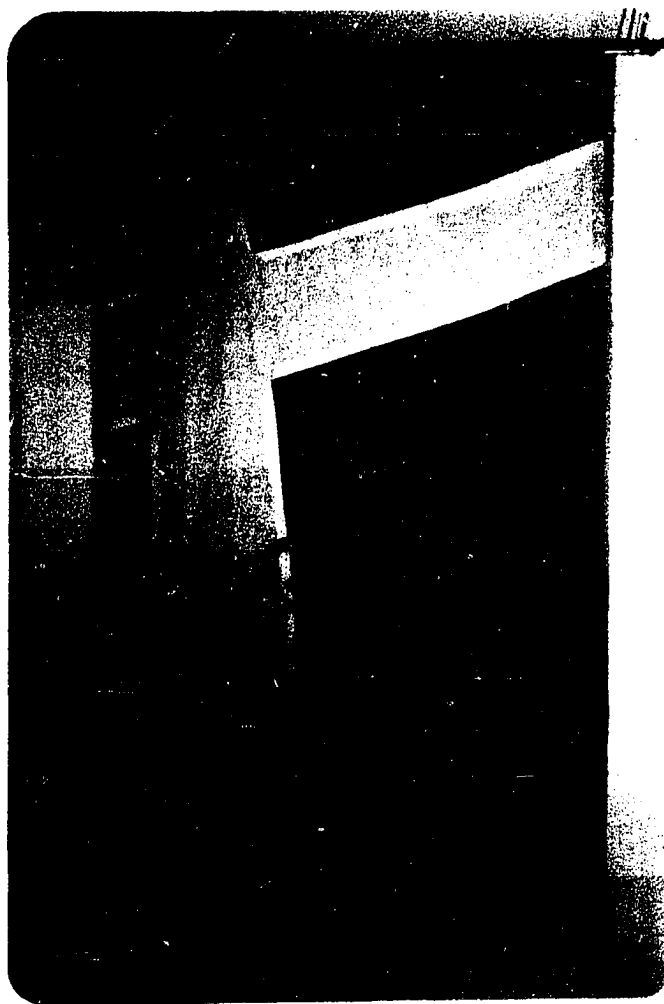
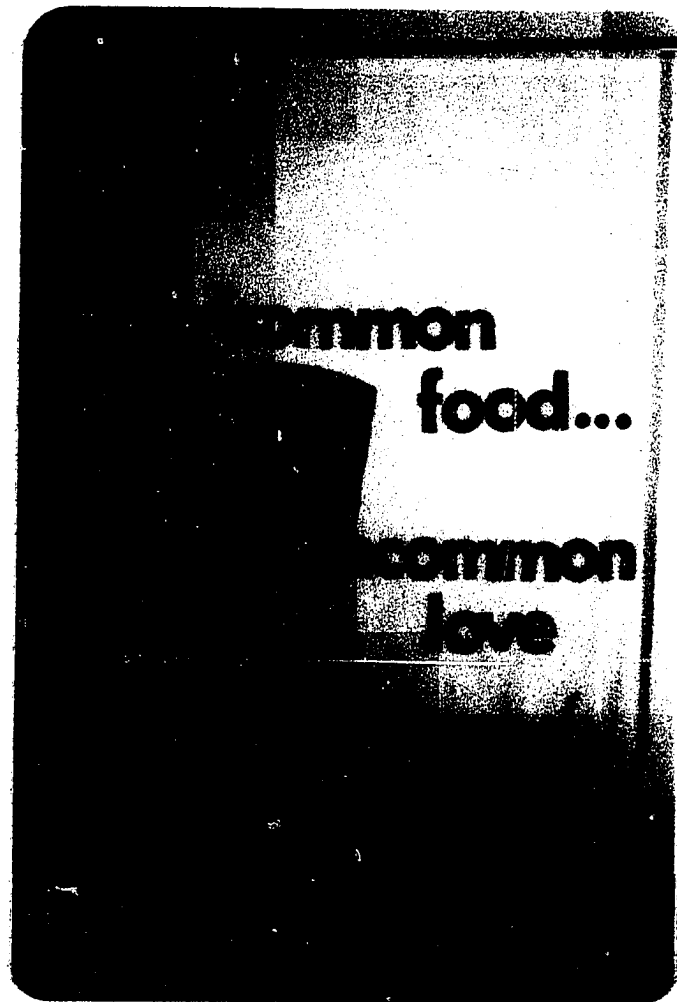


Plate XI

COMMUNION

Bread and a chalice; a sheaf of wheat and a bunch of grapes; these are readily recognizable symbols for the Eucharist.



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